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ABSTRACT

Reports on a study of barriers to success in learning English as a second language (ESL). The study incorporates data gathered from case studies of two Korean children (aged five and seven years), from the results of writing and reading tests of English administered to academically successful Korean high school students, and from the language proficiency achievement levels of two groups of Korean college freshmen taught English by different methods emphasizing oral and written skills, respectively. The findings of the study support the idea that the secret to learning English naturally is to effectively accumulate naturalistic experiences in using English for actual communication. It is proposed that this instructional approach helps students functionalize static knowledge about English for better oral and written performance. Specific techniques and approaches for promoting communicative language skills are outlined for ESL teachers. (MSE)

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WHY STUDENTS FAIL IN ESL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE*

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WHY STUDENTS FAIL IN ESL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE*

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We know that many students fail in English as a foreign or second language. Why do they fail? I think it is a matter of target of learning. In Korea, for example, most of the students who study English at school plan to go to a college. To be admitted to a college they are supposed to take a written test of English included in the Academic Achievement Examination for College Entrance. I had a close look at the English test last year. It was a written test in which a large number of test items required of students certain static knowledge about English including grammatical rules and meanings of lexical and idiomatic expressions. Besides, the test format induced or all well students to read the given English texts word by word in terms of their meanings in Korean. So, many of the students spend much of their study time of several years increasing static knowledge about English and cultivating their test-taking skills. How could we expect good performances in their use of English from those who have not learned how to use English. Knowledge about English and ability to use English for purposes of actual comprehension and expression of ideas are not identical.

NATURALITY IN ESL LEARNING

To help students perform better in actual communication, we will need effective programs. To construct effective programs we will need some applicable insights into a successful learning of English as a new language.

In 1978, I went to Albany, New York, in the United States to pursue my doctoral studies, and my family came over in November to stay with me for five years. My children were young at that time; however, they were fluent Korean speakers as normal as others at their age. They did not speak English at all, and I was able to collect naturalistic data from them while they were in the process of learning English naturally, immersed in the American society.

The observed children were Mi Kim, a girl of five years old, Ho, a boy of seven, and Tae, a boy of eleven when they arrived in the U.S. Various types of their monologues and dialogues in English were systematically collected for three years.

A small portion of the collected protocols were analyzed for a study of the children's acquisition of the functions of the English article A and THE, which was reported in my doctoral dissertation in 1983.

The results of the study revealed that the children learned English within three years, and that they learned spoken English earlier than written English (Kim, 1983, 1987, 1988). Ordinary people like my children can successfully learn English as a new language when they are allowed to use it naturally.

What do we mean by "naturally"? Hoping to gain some applicable insights into the process of successful language learning, let's have a look at some of the data collected from my children.

Data A: Free Talking, January 4, 1979
Mi, Ho, and Tae

1. Ho: Big girl, you. (To Tae, his brother)
2. Tae: Oh, no!
3. Ho: Oh, yes!
4. Tae: Big boy!
5. Ho: No.
6. Tae: Hey, Pluto.. Pluto bike.. wingwing.
7. Tae: Hey, Mi. Mi doll.
(LAUGHS)
8. Mi: Big girl.
9. Ho: Tae house.
10. Tae: Oh, no!
(LAUGHS)
11. Mi: Tae, big girl.

In Data A, the children freely talked to each other. The data was recorded on January 4, 1979, and transcribed verbatim. It was approximately one month after they arrived in the U.S. Their English is underdeveloped. However, they are using it to exchange their ideas. For example, Ho, the younger boy, says: "Big girl, you" to Tae, his brother, meaning, "You are a girl." His intention seems to make fun of him. Tae responds: "Oh, no!" Ho says: "Oh, yes!" Then, Tae says: "Big boy!" meaning: "I am a boy, not a girl."

The data also shows us that the unit of English they are using is the word, not the sentence. Some utterances look like sentences; however, a closer look at them reveals that they are not sentences. For example, Utterance 6 reads: "Pluto bike wingwing," and we know it is not English. It is a Korean sentence pattern of Subject + Object + Verb with two English words "Pluto" and "bike" filling into the slots of the Subject and Object. The speaker uses wingwing in the slot of Verb. In Korean, wingwing represents a sound produced by a running car or motorcycle and he uses it in the place of a verb "tanda" or "ride" in English. If two Korean word-endings are attached to "Pluto" and "bike", then, 'Pluto-ga bike-rul wingwing (or tanda)" will make a good Korean sentence which means, "Pluto rides a bike" in English. So, Utterance 6 also shows that the unit of English they can manage is the word, not the sentence. Look at "Mi doll" in Utterance 7, and "Tae house" in 9. The children themselves and we know what they mean by the utterances; however, we can hardly say that they are sentences. In time, the children will learn to use the verb "Be" and the article "A" to form appropriate English sentences which will read, "Mi is a doll" and "Tae is a house." At this moment, they cannot handle anything larger than the unit of word in their communication performances.

Now, we will examine Mi Kim's continuous progress in her look-and-tell performances. On May 31, 1979, approximately 6 months after her arrival in the U.S., this picture of a man cooking outdoors was shown to her and she was asked to talk about it in English. We will listen to her voice and have a look at the verbatim transcript.

<Mi Kim's Voice B1>

Data B1: Look-Tell, P#1, May 31, 1979
Mi Kim

1. This .. man is "mounsturs" (for mustache).
2. This man is cook.
3. uh.. This girl is eating and talk.
4. This is uh.. bread.
("That's the end" in Korean)
....
5. This is trees.
6. This is tables.
("That's the end" in Korean)

Let's look at the transcript, Data B1. The unit of sentence apparently begins to appear, and all utterances read like English. None of them appears to be formed after any Korean language pattern.

Nevertheless, Mi Kim uses poor English. For example, all the subjects are either "this" or "this + Noun" form, and the verb "Be" is repeatedly used regardless of the variety of the content of the predicates that require other verb forms than the "Be".

We will see the next data collected on July 31, 1979. It was approximately two years after Mi Kim produced Data B1. She talked about the same picture. Let's listen to her voice before we have a look at the transcript.

<Mi Kim's Voice B2>

Data B2: Look-Tell, P#1, July 31, 1981
Mi Kim

1. There is man with mustache.
2. And he.. he has black hair.
3. And there's.. a tissue and.. breads.. pots.. basket.. honey.. bottle of honey.. bottle of water and cups.. and newspaper, table, bag, sticks, butter.. soup.. I mean meat.
4. And there was a lady.
5. And there was Pepsi on the table.
6. And there was dishes on the table, too.
7. And the man was wearing white.. and blue stripe shirt and black pants.
8. The lady was wearing white shirt and red sweater.
9. It was.. summer.
10. And there was trees.
11. It was all green.
12. And there was lot of woods.
....
13. And the man had a ring on.
14. And he was smiling and cooking.
15. That's all.

This, Data B2, demonstrates that she now begins to deal with a text of connected sentences. For example, Utterance 1 starts with "There is" and the subject is "man". Utterance 2 has the same subject, but "he", its pronoun, replaces it. The two sentences are textually connected. For another example,

Look at its topic 1. It reads: "And there was a lady." The use of the article A introduces the concept into the text. Then, Utterance 2 reads: "The lady was wearing white shirt and red sweater." Here the article THE marks the topic LADY as an identifiable concept in the text.

Those and other examples we can find in the data indicate that Mi Kim can now deal with the unit of text which is larger than the unit of sentence.

Finally, we will listen to her mature English recorded in November, 1983, approximately five years after she began to learn English as a new language. She talked about the same picture.

Data B3: Look-Tell, P#1, November 13, 1983
Mi Kim

1. This man is uh cooking something.
2. And they.. it is a cooking place.. and, I mean, a picnic place.
3. And there are other people, too.
4. This man has mustache.
5. And uh he has.. bread and apple sauces, stuffs like that.. and a fire going and a pot cooking some soup
6. Uh the other table, there are, there is one lady, and she was drinking Pepi, Pep, Pepsi Cola.
7. And she is talking to another lady across from her.
8. Uh.. this picnic place has a lot of trees.
9. And it is.. summer.
10. It's August.
11. And this man.. has long sleeves on so that mosquitoes don't bite him.
12. The ladies don't know how to cook very well, so the man is cooking for them.
13. And he has a glove next to the pot that is burned.

Let's look at the transcript. She deals with a larger group of sentences as a meaningful unit. For example, "this man" in Utterance 1 is connected with the "other people" in Utterance 3 to form a meaningful text. The speed of her speech and the ways of talking appears natural, including her natural way of self-correction whose examples we can see in Utterance 2 which reads: "And they.. it is a cooking place.. and I mean, a picnic place." Besides, the appropriate uses of "so that" in Utterance 11, "so" in 12, and the relative pronoun "that" in 13, demonstrate that her ability to manage the unit of text over and beyond the unit of sentence is now mature.

Isn't this the natural way of learning a new language? Being immersed into a society where English is used implies several things for the learner.

(1) The learner is abundantly provided with real models of spoken and written English.
(2) The unit of English available from the beginning to learn how to use English is the natural unit of meaning, that is, connected discourse.
(3) Meaning always comes along with English, and meaning is more important than its form in communication performances.
(4) The learner is challenged to use English for actual communication whether the forms are "broken" or not. Somewhere in the processes of experiencing how to use English, they pick up certain "rules" for better performances in comprehension and expression of ideas.

The secret of learning English naturally seems to be to accumulate experiences of using English for actual communication. The progress is

recognized in terms of gradual expansion of the unit of English the human manages in communication get engines. Formation of appropriate words, phrases, sentences and texts, seems to take care of itself as the manageable unit of English is gradually expanded.

WHY DO STUDENTS FAIL?

Then, why do students fail in English when English is not new to their native language? Last spring we had an opportunity to test 502 seniors from 143 high schools in five major cities in Korea. The students planned to major in science and technology when admitted to a college. They belonged to the best 10% students in their schools in terms of their academic record.

They had a listening and reading test. The listening test was composed of certain items from some TOEFL forms and the reading test was constructed for this study. In Part A of the listening test, students heard 12 short statements. They were supposed to comprehend the meaning of each statement to choose one option, out of four given, that expresses the same or similar meaning of the statement. The results showed that they understood only 45.4% of the given statements. In Part B, students heard 12 short conversations and they understood only 41.7%.

A closer examination of the students' answer sheets revealed two overwhelming trends. First, many of them seemed to rely on certain salient individual words to make a wild guess about the meaning of the given statement or conversation. Second, in many cases they seemed to rely on the sounds alone in their attempt to locate the right answers, failing to follow the meaning of the whole statement or conversation.

<Example 1: Statement Listening, Item #12>

VOICE: "I DON'T ALWAYS BEGIN WORK AT 9 A.M."
28% (A) I always do better work in the morning.
9% (B) I sometimes start work at different hours.
5% (C) I never get to work on time.
55% (D) I don't ever start work at nine.
3%=No response

Let's have a look at an example. Example 1 says: "I don't always begin work at 9:00 a.m." The expected response is: (B) "I sometimes start work at different hours." It was chosen by only 9% of the students. 55% chose (D) "I don't ever start work at nine." It is not the meaning of the given statement, but here we find that the words "don't" and "nine" appear in Option (D), and that the given statement also has "don't" and "nine". 28% chose (A) where we find the words "always" and "morning", and the given statement also has "always" and "a.m." which means "morning". Very probably that is why they chose the wrong options (D) and (A).

<Example 2: Statement Listening, Item #6>

VOICE: "THE PROGRAM WILL BE ON AT TEN."
21% (A) We will attend the program.
17% (B) It will go beyond the tent.
17% (C) There will be ten grams of it.
43% (D) It will begin at ten o'clock.
2%=No response

Let's have a look at another example. Example 2 says: "The program will be on at ten." The expected response is: (D) "It will begin at ten o'clock." It was chosen by only 43% of the students. 21% chose (A), and in it we find the word "attend" which sounds like "at ten" in the statement. (B) and (C) were chosen by 34% in all. In (B) we find "ten" which also sounds like "ten" in the statement, and in (C) we find "grams" which sounds like the latter part of the word "program" in the statement. Very probably that is why they chose the wrong options (A), (B), and (C).

<Example 3: Conversation Listening, Item #23>

(WOMAN'S VOICE) "DO YOU WANT ME TO EXPLAIN THOSE PROBLEMS BEFORE YOUR EXAM?"
(MAN'S VOICE) "WHAT'S THE POINT? I DON'T UNDERSTAND A THING."
QUESTION: WHAT DOES THE MAN MEAN?

51% (A) There's only one point he doesn't understand.
24% (B) These problems won't be on the exam.
15% (C) He would like some help.
8% (D) He can't learn the material.
2%=No response

We will have one more example from the part of conversation listening. In Example 3," a woman's voice says: "Do you want me to explain those problems before your exam?" Then, a man's voice says: "What's the point? I don't understand a thing." And the question is: 'What does the man mean?"

The expected response is: (D) "He can't learn the material," which was chosen by only 8%. In Option (A) we see the words "point" and "understand", and in (B) the words "problems" and "exam". These words appear in the given conversation. A total of 75% of the students chose the wrong options (A) and (B).

These and other observations of the students' inappropriate responses lead us to infer that the unit of English the students can manage is the unit of word. This seems to indicate that they did not have sufficient experiences of using English for actual communication.

For a reading test, students read two short English passages to answer 10 comprehension questions. The average score was 23.6%, and the first five questions about the first passage were responded to by 97.8% of the students, while the latter five about the second passage were responded to by only 59.8%. This implies that a large number of students failed to finish reading the second passage. The average score of comprehension of the first passage alone was 54.2%, and this should be accepted as their actual level of comprehension. To this we ought to add the fact that the students' reading speed was very slow. Their slow reading seems to indicate that most of them read English word by word, and we know that word-by-word reading blocks effective understanding

of the main idea and structure of the whole passage.

From these and other observations we can predict that an application of a naturalistic approach is very likely to help students functionalize their knowledge about English for better performances in actual communication.

NATURALISTIC APPROACH: AN EXPERIMENT

I designed a research study to see if the insights we gained earlier from our examinations of the data from the children and from the high school seniors were valid, and to obtain further information about learning spoken and written English. For the study, two remedial programs were organized.

The specific objective of the study was to collect data which we can use to form some reliable answers to the following questions.

1. Will a naturalistic approach help students make progress in their listening performances?
2. Will the same approach help them make progress in their reading performances?
3. Will the spoken English program help them make progress in their reading performances? And will the written English program help them make progress in their listening performances?

TWO REMEDIAL PROGRAMS

The goal of the programs was to help individual students effectively accumulate naturalistic experiences of using spoken or written English for actual comprehension and expression of ideas.

To induce the student's naturalistic performances the following principles were applied to the organization of the spoken and the written English program.

(1) The natural unit of English should be dealt with. For spoken English, the student should be helped to understand the given context and to perform within the context. For written English, the paragraph should be the smallest unit of reading and writing.
(2) English should be used for actual comprehension and expression of meaning.
(3) The student should be helped to be challenged to experience naturalistic performances for actual communication.
(4) The major role of the instructor should be that of an organizer and manager of the class.
(5) The instructor should help the student pick up the learning points for faster learning and better performances.

For the effectiveness of their accumulation of naturalistic experiences, a four-step procedure was formed, in an attempt to apply to the class management the natural way of learning English we observed earlier.

Step 1. Help students get access to models of natural English.
Step 2. Lead them to use the models in their naturalistic performances.
Step 3. Help them grasp learning points.
Step 4. Lead them to experience more of the same and similar performances.

Naturalistic communication experiences for spoken and written English were provided in a large quantity in each of the following categories:

In the spoken English program
(1) conversation, (2) listening, (3) look-and-tell activities, and

(4) independent oral reading of easy books
In the written English program
(1) read-and-summarize activities, (2) silent reading of short passages, (3) write-and-correct activities, and (4) independent silent reading of easy books

DESIGN

Ten college freshmen from my own class were invited into the experiment. From my observation of their class activities they needed a remedial program. They were told of the goal of the programs, and all agreed to attend the classes for the experiment regularly.

The students were randomly divided into two groups: one for spoken and the other for written English. The spoken English group were told to work on spoken English only, and the written group to work on written English only.

Each group had a 2-hour class a day, Monday through Thursday, for five weeks, last summer, and each student was to spend 1 to 3 hours every day for the assigned independent work.

The first two parts in listening and the reading section from two TOEFL forms were used as the pre- and post-test in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1. Results: Spoken English Group

Student		Listening State%	Conv%	(Total%)	Reading %
A	pre	40	28.6	(34.3)	20
	post	80	33.3	(56.7)	70
	gain	40	4.7	(22.4)	50
B	pre	35	42.9	(39)	40
	post	70	40	(55)	63.3
	gain	35	2.9	(16)	23.3
C	pre	15	21.4	(18.2)	60
	post	45	40	(42.5)	76.7
	gain	30	18.6	(24.3)	16.7
D	pre	20	28.6	(24.3)	30
	post	35	33.3	(34.2)	40
	gain	15	4.7	(9.9)	10
E	pre	40	42.9	(41.5)	60
	post	45	46.7	(45.9)	60
	gain	5	3.8	(4.4)	0
TOTAL:	pre	30%	32.9%	(31.5%)	42%
	post	55%	38.7%	(46.9%)	62%
	gain	25%	5.8%	(15.4%)	20%

Table 2. Results: Written English Group

Student		Listening state%	Listening conv%	Listening (Total%)	Reading %
V	pre	50	50	(50)	2
	post	50	33.3	(41.7)	73.3
	gain	0	-16.7	(-8.3)	53.3
W	pre	40	28.6	(34.3)	20
	post	35	26.7	(30.5)	63.3
	gain	-5	-1.9	(-3.8)	43.3
X	pre	30	50	(40)	30
	post	35	46.7	(40.9)	56.7
	gain	5	-3.3	(-0.9)	26.7
Y	pre	20	14.3	(17.2)	30
	post	45	13.3	(29.2)	43.3
	gain	25	-1	(12)	13.3
Z	pre	50	57.1	(53.6)	50
	post	50	20	(35)	63.3
	gain	0	-37.1	(-18.6)	13.3
TOTAL:	pre	38%	40%	(39%)	30%
	post	43%	28%	(35.5%)	60%
	gain	5%	-12%	(-3.5%)	30%

Let's examine the results in relation to the three research questions. Table 1 shows that the spoken English group made a gain of 25% in statement listening and 5.8% in conversation listening, with an average of 15.4%. Each of the students demonstrated a certain amount of gain. From this data we learn that effective accumulation of naturalistic experiences of spoken English positively helps students perform better in listening. For an apparent improvement in conversation listening, however, students will need much more of the same and similar experiences than they had within the five week period.

Table 2 shows that the written English group made a gain of 30% in reading comprehension. Each of the students demonstrated a certain amount of gain. From this data we learn that effective accumulation of naturalistic experiences of written English positively helps students perform better in reading.

These two readings of the tables lead us to give a positive answer to the first two research questions. For the third question, we will have to look at the two tables once again.

Table 1 shows that the spoken English group made a gain of 20% in reading comprehension. Almost all students demonstrated a certain amount of gain. Table 1 also shows us an apparently positive rank order correlation between the gain scores of statement listening and the gain scores of reading comprehension, which is summarized in Table 3. We can hardly see any positive rank order correlation between the conversation listening and the reading.

Table 3. Spoken English Group: Rank order correlation between the gains in the listening and the reading

Students:	A	B	C	D	E
Statement -Listening:	40	35	30	15	5
Reading:	50	23.3	16.7	10	0
Conversation -Listening:	(4.7)	(2.3)	(18.6)	(4.7)	(3.8)

From this data we can form a hypothesis that effective accumulation of naturalistic experiences of spoken English generally helps students make progress in written English as well as spoken English itself.

On the other hand, Table 2 shows that the written English group failed to demonstrate any apparent improvement on their performances in listening. In statement listening they made a gain of 5%, but we can hardly find a positive rank order correlation between the gain scores of reading comprehension and the gain scores of statement listening, which is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Written English Group: Rank orders between the gains in the reading and the statement listening

Students:	V	W	X	Y	Z
Reading:	53.3	43.3	26.7	13.3	13.3
Statement -Listening:	0	-5	5	25	0

From this data we learn that effective accumulation of naturalistic experiences of written English does not always help students make apparent progress in spoken English.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

On the basis of the answers we formed from the data, we can conclude that the experiment appeared to positively confirm the insights we gained earlier from our examinations of the data from the children and from the high school seniors.

The secret of learning English as a new language naturally must be to effectively accumulate naturalistic experiences of using English for actual communication. A naturalistic approach can help students functionalize their static knowledge about English for better spoken and written performances. Learning to use spoken English will generally help them make progress in written English; however, learning to use written English does not seem to always help them make progress in spoken English.

We should admit that this research study has certain limitations including the following. First, the period of five weeks was not long enough to register the student's eventual achievements. Second, the students' individual differences were recognized in the results summarized in the tables, but these individual differences were not further investigated in this study. Third, speaking and writing performances were not evaluated.

In relation to these and other limitations of this study, further research studies should be done in this line of investigation in the future.

Now, let's consider what should be done for those who appear poor in

performances of actual communication in spite of their knowledge about English which is useful for certain tests. These should be included in the characterization of a naturalistic approach, and these should be recommended for a remedial class and for a beginning class of natural English.

(1) Abundant models of real English should be provided to the student.
(2) The unit of English dealt with in the programs should be natural. For spoken English the student should perform within the natural context. For written English the student should deal with the paragraph as the smallest unit.
(3) The instructor should always make sure, whenever possible, that the student comprehends meaning and expresses meaning.
(4) The instructor should spend much more time in organizing and managing the class than in "teaching" English to the student.
(5) The instructor should help the student pick up certain "rules" for better performances and for effective accumulation of experiences.
(6) Spoken English should be learned prior to or together with written English.
(7) A written English program should be given to the student for better performances in written English.

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